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Book Review

Practising Social Inclusion

Ann Taket, Beth R. Crisp, Melissa Graham, Lisa Hanna, Sophie Goldingay and Linda Wilson (eds) (2014) Oxon: Routledge 2014, 311pp., ISBN 9780415531078, \$31.99 (paperback)

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Debates over the concept and substance of social inclusion and its associated terms such as social exclusion, social cohesion and marginalisation, date back to the adoption of social inclusion as a policy program in the European Union in the late 1990s.

In the face of dramatic failures to eradicate poverty in long established programs, a new explanatory framework was required to persuade member states to commit to the continued funding of social initiatives. The idea of social inclusion suggested something more than beefing up welfare state measures around employment and social security. It was seemingly possible in the modern Europe of the mid 1990s, to be excluded from full participation in the life of society, due to a range of factors around race, gender, disability, unemployment and low paid work requiring multiple jobs, education, geographical location, health status and more.

This debate came somewhat late to these shores. It is as if we watched in wonderment, the creation by the Blair 'New' Labour Government of the Social Exclusion Unit in 1997, with its policy drivers of 'joined up solutions to joined up problems'. The high water mark of social inclusion policy thinking and action in Australia can be seen in the creation of the South Australian Labor government's Social Inclusion Unit in 2002. The incoming Rudd Labor government of 2007 established a Social Inclusion Agenda, Social Inclusion ministerial portfolio and Social Inclusion Board in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, headed by then Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard. The main policy emphasis was on paid employment, with increased access to education as a key lever for social inclusion.

The Social Inclusion Board was a casualty of the incoming 2013 Abbott administration, wielding the axe with unseemly haste within hours of assuming government on the basis that social inclusion would (of course) be fully integrated into the work of the newly created Department of Social Services.

This book is an important reminder of this recent history (a glossary of key terms and a conceptual timeline would be useful) and the requirement for a social inclusion agenda in Australia. Organised in seven parts, the book may seem clunky at first view, but persistence on the part of the reader really pays off. The editors are an ensemble cast from Deakin University and variously contribute chapters throughout the work. The key to this text is the emphasis on more than talking about the concept of social inclusion, but practising it, hence the title and the useful reminder of this in each section heading.

The book traverses a broad landscape of practice contexts and settings, including street-based sex workers, people with disabilities, the community services sector, HIV prevention, childlessness and also Aboriginal health. While for some readers this will be a rich banquet of ideas, case studies, narratives

and learning points, the sheer breadth of scope here means that some of the chapters are brief and may leave some wanting more substance and detail than is on offer. This may be an inevitable consequence of producing such a wide ranging piece and many readers will find the book as I did, interesting and engaging on a number of levels and this is a strong aspect of the work, in that there is something of use and appeal for most readers.

The book is topped and tailed by introductory and concluding chapters by the editors and these serve to helpfully score the paintwork at the beginning, priming the reader about the intellectual and policy origins of social inclusion.

The conclusion reminds the reader of some key points in the doing of social inclusion work. It acknowledges the limitations of some of the coverage attempted in the twenty chapters, but reinforces the central importance of moving beyond social inclusion via economic participation, towards relational and rights and capabilities frameworks. Of equal significance is the observation that in the practising of social inclusion, 'messy' and exclusionary outcomes can emerge from well-meaning attempts at inclusion, due to administrative fiat, budgetary restrictions and the inherent fluidity of the social inclusion-exclusion terminology.

The work closes with a reaffirmation that genuine forms of social inclusion are a human right and that social workers, policy makers, educators and others in the broad field of social welfare, should work towards this goal. This book is a vital resource in this growing body of critical literature, marking a distinctive contribution to thinking about and doing social inclusion, particularly in the current absence of a national approach in this area of social policy.